



Transcript for “Old Southwest Humor”

An Audio Program from *This Goodly Land: Alabama's Literary Landscape*

Interviewer Maiben Beard and Dr. Benjamin B. Williams, Professor emeritus, of the Auburn University Montgomery Department of English discuss Old Southwest humor. This transcript has been edited for readability.

Ms. Beard: Welcome to *This Goodly Land's* audio program about Old Southwest humor. I'm Maiben Beard. We are talking today with Dr. Benjamin B. Williams, Professor Emeritus of the Auburn University Montgomery Department of English. It's good to have you with us today, Dr. Williams.

Dr. Williams: I'm glad to be here. Thank you.

Ms. Beard: Let's start with a question that's probably on every listener's mind. Why do we call it “Old Southwest” humor when the geographical area involved is in the Southeastern United States?

Dr. Williams: That's a question that requires both an historical and a geographical answer. After the American Revolution, the United States was composed of an area from the Atlantic coast to the Mississippi River. All the land west of that belonged to France, and Britain continued to hold Canada. Most of the original colonies claimed land in this West beyond their present borders. Virginia's original land grant went on forever, I guess, to the West. During the period of the Articles of Confederation (that is, the time before the Constitution), the seaboard states agreed to relinquish their claims of land in the West to the federal government.

One of the last acts under the Confederation, and a most important one, was the passage of the Northwest Ordinance, which spelled out how territories could become states. The area covered by the Ordinance was the Northwest Territory in 1787. In 1798, Congress named the area west of Georgia and south of Tennessee the Mississippi Territory. This area was popularly referred to as the Southwest, essentially what is now the states of Mississippi and Alabama. Much of this *Old Southwest* was held by four tribes of the Muskogee Indian Nation. The Gulf Coast area of what is now Mississippi and Alabama was at that time Spanish territory.

White settlements in the Mississippi Territory began along the Mississippi River and slowly moved eastward to what is now Alabama. Other settlers came into the area from Tennessee and the older states by following the Holston River south to where it joined the Tennessee River and

then on down into northern Alabama. This region was once known as the “Old Southwest” and the “Early American Frontier.” It is here that this distinctive Southwest humor had its beginnings. As the American borders later stretched to the Pacific Ocean, this section became known as the “*Old Southwest*.”

Ms. Beard: What’s the time period for these stories; when were they being written and read?

Dr. Williams: The earliest humorist sketches in the Old Southwest most certainly were printed in some of the earliest newspapers, as the printing press seemed to follow settlements. The first known newspaper in Alabama was the *Mobile Centinel*, published in 1811. I don’t know if there is any humor in that one, but it was published at Ft. Stoddert, some thirty miles north of the city of Mobile, which at that time was in Spanish hands. The period when the humorist sketches flourished was somewhat later in the 1830s, especially after the Indians were removed.

Ms. Beard: What was happening in the United States during this time?

Dr. Williams: The most significant happening in the 1830s in this area was the removal of the Indians to Oklahoma, opening up large portions of land to the settlers who flocked into this new frontier. In Johnson Jones Hooper’s character Simon Suggs, we have an episode where he becomes a militia captain and scares the people in the neighborhood about the Creek Indian uprising (as they were refusing to go West), but there was no danger where he was and he was just pulling a trick on the settlers there.

Joseph Glover Baldwin also wrote about the “flush times.” This is that period from about 1832 to ’37 where all the land was opened up and people poured in. But then, in 1837, the first major depression in American history, called the “Panic of 1837” occurred, and Baldwin also wrote about this depression. He wrote in one place that people went broke by neighborhoods.

Ms. Beard: Who was reading these stories?

Dr. Williams: Although the Southwest frontier had much illiteracy, there was a sufficient readership for small town newspapers to flourish, such as Johnson Jones Hooper’s *La Fayette East Alabamian* in which his earliest sketches appeared. He edited the newspaper along with his law practice. In Tuscaloosa, John Gorman Barr also was a lawyer and an editor of the *Tuscaloosa Observer* and published his sketches in that paper. The readership for the most part was those people who inhabited the area who could read, I suppose.

Ms. Beard: What did the frontier represent to these readers?

Dr. Williams: The frontier, for those who came from the East and had a professional background, represented a new beginning, especially young lawyers, doctors, or whatever, but for the farmers who came, they came for the land that they could not afford back in the older states. The humor in the newspapers, of course, afforded a relief from that hard life of scratching out a living on a new frontier.

Ms. Beard: Tell us something about the people who were writing these stories.

Dr. Williams: In most cases, the humorous sketches were written by newspaper editors or lawyers. Several of the writers, such as Johnson Jones Hooper, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, and John Gorman Barr along with Joseph Glover Baldwin, represent the best of the frontier writers. All of these men were lawyers and, in the case of Joseph Glover Baldwin, he was content with practicing law. He never edited a newspaper but elected to publish his humor in the most important leading magazine of the old South, which is called the *Southern Literary Messenger* at Richmond.

Ms. Beard: These stories were very popular. So, why were so many of them published anonymously or under pen names?

Dr. Williams: As mentioned earlier, many of the humorists were lawyers and also aspiring politicians. Both Hooper and Longstreet were embarrassed later in life when they were publicly addressed as one of their frontier characters. For the aspiring politician, anonymity was a better course.

Ms. Beard: These stories originally appeared in newspapers and magazines, not in books. Why was that?

Dr. Williams: Sketches in the local newspapers were very popular and were picked up by William Trotter Porter in his magazine *The Spirit of the Times*. For the writers themselves, this was not considered literature, and many of them had to be urged to publish, such as Hooper; Porter was instrumental in getting Hooper to publish a collection of his stories. Judge Longstreet on the other hand had published a collection of his stories as early as 1835 called *Georgia Scenes*. Hooper's *Some Adventures of Captain [Simon] Suggs* came out in 1845, and the *Flush Times* was published in 1853. Although both of them were successes when they appeared, they were at least a decade or more after Longstreet's book.

Ms. Beard: Tell us about *The Spirit of the Times* and its role in popularizing these stories.

Dr. Williams: The person who gave a national audience to the southwest humorist was William Trotter Porter of New York. He was the editor of perhaps the most popular sporting and humor magazine of the day. It was called *The Spirit of the Times: A Chronicle of the Turf, [Agriculture,] Field Sports, Literature, and the Stage*. Porter had a genius for finding humorous sketches in obscure country newspapers such as the *La Fayette East Alabamian*. Porter had very many well-known contributors, and after he came upon Hooper's "Taking the Census" ([which] was the first one published in the *Spirit*), he said "We must enlist him among our correspondents."

Ms. Beard: Tell us something about the stories themselves. What are they like? What are some of their characteristic features?

Dr. Williams: A good example of Southwest humor is the first sketch of Hooper's that was published in *The Spirit of the Times* called "Taking the Census in Alabama by a Chicken Man of 1840." Hooper, who had worked as a census taker in Tallapoosa County, gives a hilarious

account of the difficulties of getting information out of rural citizens in this frontier state. The 1840 census was the first one where citizens were asked about their livestock, and hence the census taker became known as a “chicken man” on the frontier. I have an example of that in my *Literary History*. I’ll just read a passage or two.

We’re talking about “Taking the Census” here.

Although the yarn relies, in part, upon the comic elements inherent in illiterate backwoodsmen, Hooper’s recounting of the trials of the census taker of more than a century ago has lost little of its humor for the modern reader. There were, no doubt, people who, in [2000, for instance], felt [like] their Alabama ancestors had, “that a tremendous tax would ... follow the minute [the] investigation of [their] private affairs” was made public, but it is less likely that they subjected the modern census taker, “sent forth to count the noses of all men, women, children, and chickens” of the country, to the taunts, curses, and abuse heaped upon the assistant marshals of the government’s fifth decennial enumeration of the country’s people and poultry.

The first episode in the story “Taking the Census” follows, and I quote from the story:

Drawing our blanks from their case, we proceeded—“I am the man, madam, that takes the census, and the—”

“The mischief you are!” said the old termagant. “Yes, I’ve hearn of you; Parson W. told me you was coming; and I told him just what I tell you, that if you said ‘cloth,’ ‘soap,’ *ur* ‘chickens’ to *me*, I’d set the dogs on ye. Here, Bull! Here, Pomp!” Two wolfish curs responded to the call for Bull and Pomp, by coming to the door, smelling at our feet with a slight growl, and then laid down on the steps. “Now,” continued the old she savage, “them is the severest dogs in this country ...”

“Yes, ma’am,” we said meekly; “Bull and Pomp seem to be very fine dogs.”

After the old woman has delivered a tirade against Van Buren, taxes, and the census marshals, she insists that the census taker “jist put down ‘Judy Tompkins, ageable woman and four children’.” The assistant marshal objects [to this and was]

Resolute, until she appealed to [her dogs], Bull and Pomp. At the first glimpse of their teeth, our courage gave way, and we made the entry in a bold hand across a blank schedule—“Judy Tompkins, ageable woman and four children.”

[chuckling] That’s still funny.

Ms. Beard: What was the appeal of these stories?

Dr. Williams: Many of the stories, like “Taking the Census,” looked at the exaggerations possible in the sketch played out against the narrator’s purpose. In this case, the narrator, the census taker, has a job to do but is thwarted by the antagonism of the widow who doesn’t wish to disclose her age or what properties she possesses.

Ms. Beard: What do these stories tell us about Alabama and other Southern states during this time?

Dr. Williams: Some of the sketches tell in humorous ways some of the conditions of the time. In Baldwin's "The Bar of the Southwest," he tells of the state of the courts in this new country and the problems faced by judges and young lawyers opposed by lawyers with a larger reputation. Other stories, such as Hooper's frontier rascal, Simon Suggs, whose motto is "It's good to be shifty in a new country," entertain the readers with his lies, his tricks, and his ruses. One example is the sketch called "The Captain Attends a Camp Meeting," where Simon tricks the preacher into allowing him to pray over the collection and then he runs off with it.

Ms. Beard: Are these stories realistic? Are they historically accurate?

Dr. Williams: Some of the conditions of the frontier are expressed through the humor: living conditions, religious attitudes, and the state of litigation where judges and lawyers are half-trained. Some seem to express the realistic conditions of the time; perhaps an inkling of the true history emerges but not very often.

Ms. Beard: What happened to the Old Southwest humor stories after the Civil War?

Dr. Williams: For the most part (there were exceptions), the Old Southwest humor gave way to the era of local color writing and domestic sentimentalism in the novel; this followed the Civil War. These genres dominated the last decades of the Nineteenth Century, before they had to give way to the rise of realism. At least one writer who frequently published in Porter's *Spirit of the Times* in the 1840s, George Washington Harris of Tennessee and Alabama, published a collection called *Sut Lovingood Yarns* in 1867, but the fad of the Southwest humor had pretty well vanished by that time.

Ms. Beard: Were later writers influenced by these stories? If so, which ones?

Dr. Williams: The most important writer to be influenced by the Southwest humorists is Mark Twain. The antics of Tom Sawyer and especially Huckleberry Finn owe much to the older tradition, sometimes even copying a joke. Huck Finn, for instance, puts gunpowder in a pipe, which is right out of one of the Simon Suggs episodes. Some modern critics see the influence of the frontier on Faulkner's Snopes family in some of his novels. The North Carolina writer, a modern writer, Guy Owens, created a character named the Flim-Flam Man, and Joe David Brown of Alabama wrote *Addie Pray* (which was made into the movie *Paper Moon*), where the father goes around selling Bibles by reading obituaries and then claiming that the person had bought the Bible for his widow—a real frontier trick.

In Alabama, two later writers seemed to have a connection with those of the Old Southwest. Near the end of the Nineteenth Century, Francis Bartow Lloyd, writing under the pseudonym Rufus Sanders, began a series of sketches under the title "Sage of Rocky Creek" in the *Montgomery Advertiser*. These sketches became very popular and Lloyd later syndicated his

column and semi-retired. Writing in the 1890s, his subjects were the old shifty characters: liars, politicians, and horse swappers in the tradition of the Old Southwest writers.

Another Alabama humorist who seems to be a transition figure between the frontier writers and the local color writers of the post-Civil War period wrote about the Alabama backwoods in the last decades of the Nineteenth Century. This writer, Idora McClellan Moore, created a backwoods cracker character from the Alabama sand hills that she called Betsy Hamilton. Betsy is presented by a series of what Moore called “familiar letters,” which were published in the Atlanta periodical, the *Sunny South*.

Idora Moore who became better known by her character Betsy Hamilton published her stories for money and made, I think, \$5 or \$10 a sketch in the *Sunny South Magazine*. Later on, she was encouraged to join the staff of the humorists on the *Atlanta Constitution* with Bill Arp and Joel Chandler Harris. She had regular columns in this newspaper for several years. She later made something of a career by reciting her backwoods tales in dialect and in costume and was much in demand in the early part of the Twentieth Century. Her only book publication, *Betsy Hamilton: Southern Character Sketches*, came out in 1921, long after the popularity of her work had passed.

In conclusion, I should say that Old Southwest humor had run its course except for these few exceptions and the echoes in Mark Twain and a few later writers and was replaced by the reading public with the genres that won that day. But anyone who reads some of these sketches by Longstreet, Hooper, Baldwin, Barr, even today, will find them very funny.

Ms. Beard: Thank you for talking with us, Dr. Williams.

Dr. Williams: It was my pleasure. Thank you.

Ms. Beard: We’ve been talking about Old Southwest humor with Dr. Benjamin B. Williams, Professor Emeritus of the Auburn University Montgomery Department of English.

This audio program is produced for *This Goodly Land: Alabama’s Literary Landscape*, a Web site connecting Alabama and its writers. You can find additional resources on this topic when you visit us at www.alabamaliterarymap.org.

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Thank you for listening.